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Fiftieth Session

34th plenary meeting

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Official Records

President: Mr. Freitas do Amaral (Portugal)

The meeting was called to order at 11.20 a.m.

Programme of work

The President: I should like to draw the attention of members to General Assembly resolution 49/244 of 12 July 1995, by which the Assembly decided to proclaim the World Week of Peace, beginning on 24 October 1995, in solemn commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations.

Turning to another subject, as all members are aware, the Special Commemorative Meeting for the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations will begin on Sunday, 22 October. As we prepare for this historic event, I should like again to impress upon delegations that their cooperation in observing rigorously the five-minute limit for each statement is indispensable for the timely and smooth conduct of the Special Commemorative Meeting. To assist speakers in keeping to the five-minute limit, a lighting-signal system has been installed on the speakers' rostrum, to the left of the speaker. Members have on their tables a one-page information note entitled "Length of statements" that explains in detail how the lighting-signal system works. I would urge all delegations to familiarize their speakers with this system.

Next, I should like to call the attention of Member States to the subject of the exercise of the right of reply during the Special Commemorative Meeting. As members will recall, at its 3rd meeting, on 22 September 1995, the General Assembly, taking into consideration the solemn

nature of the Special Commemorative Meeting and the serious time and technical-service constraints, decided that statements in exercise of the right of reply during the Special Commemorative Meeting, if any, should be made only in written form, to be circulated as documents. I would be grateful for all delegations' cooperation in this respect.

Agenda item 156

Multilingualism

Draft resolution (A/50/L.6)

The President: Before calling on the first speaker on this agenda item, I should like to propose, if there is no objection, that the list of speakers for the debate on this item be closed at 12.30 p.m. today.

It was so decided.

The President: (*interpretation from French*): I call on the representative of France to introduce the draft resolution contained in document A/50/L.6.

Mr. Ladsous (France) (*interpretation from French*): Pleased though I may be, on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary, to hail the United Nations contribution to the diversity of cultures, I would have much preferred not to have to address the Assembly this morning. Indeed, none of the many sponsors of the draft resolution that I have the honour to introduce would have taken such an

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initiative if the rules laid down by the United Nations regarding the use of languages had been properly applied. Here I wish to point out that 10 Member States have been added to list of sponsors of the draft resolution contained in document A/50/L.6: Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Germany, Guatemala, Liechtenstein, Malta, Oman, Vanuatu and Viet Nam.

Since the adoption of the Charter, whose Article 111 provides that the versions in the several languages in which it was drafted are equally authentic, our predecessors in this House have constantly striven to maintain parity between the official languages — originally numbering five, and six since 1973, when Arabic was added to the list — and working languages of the various bodies. To French and English, which have been working languages from the start and which remain the two working languages of the Secretariat, the other official languages were successively added as working languages of the General Assembly and the Security Council.

We wish to support this use of several languages on a basis of equality, which we call multilingualism. We must support it, because it is being threatened in an insidious but real way. Indeed, no one disputes the fact that equal treatment by the United Nations of its official and working languages contributes to the development of a harmonious and rich international life through the promotion of cultural diversity.

None the less, infringements of this principle — some more serious, some less — have frequently been noted. The causes of such incidents are varied, but many of them occur under the pretext of insufficient material and financial means. I shall offer just one recent example. At the beginning of the current session, the General Assembly decided that, for budgetary reasons, there would be no more night meetings: work would stop at 6 p.m. Then delegates were asked whether, when the fateful hour of 6 p.m. arrived, they would be willing to continue to work without interpretation, because in accordance with the General Assembly's decision, interpreters would not be available after that hour. This is a typical example of how a decision can be distorted. Conference services are not limited to interpretation services, but in such cases people automatically think of cutting those services to save money.

This is but one of many situations in which delegations committed to plurilingualism must come forward, sometimes in unpleasant circumstances, to remind people of the fundamental right of States Members of the Organization to work in the official language of their

choice and to have timely documentation in that language.

A great deal of will and determination is required for us to stick to the well-founded rule of respect for the principles of equality of languages. The anniversary of the United Nations provides us with another opportunity to regain control and refuse to go down the slippery slope of monolingualism, a practice which some people secretly feel would be a factor for simplification and savings, but which would actually engender a weakening of dialogue, a lack of interest in the United Nations and the unbridled development of bureaucracy and stereotypes.

The draft resolution on multilingualism, sponsored by some 68 States, is a way to respond, first of all, to the unacceptable reduction of budgets for translation and interpretation in recent years, precisely when the need for such services is constantly growing in all sectors of United Nations activities.

These services, however, are not the only ones involved. It is important that the Secretariat staff's language proficiency make possible a genuine circulation of information, documents, reports and studies in various languages. This factor must be taken into account in the recruitment and promotion of staff, for it is pointless to offer delegations a multilingual service if the heart of the Organization is not beating in time with that goal and if the Secretariat is unable to benefit from the various contributions available to it.

Finally, the teaching of languages must remain a priority in the policy of ongoing training for Secretariat staff.

Today more than ever we are persuaded that the future of the United Nations does not lie in abandoning the linguistic resources which are its wealth. We recently had outstanding examples of the road to take. The President's introductory statement, which gave an equal share to several official languages of the Organization, was a good augury for work on this agenda item. The address delivered a few days ago by His Holiness the Pope, which made use of each of the official languages, provided the Assembly with, I believe, very stirring inspiration. Now it is up to us to implement this spirit of exchange and dialogue, which everyone feels is needed at the dawn of the next 50 years of the United Nations.

But this will not result from mere solemn statements. Resolute, constant, stubborn action.

unswerving will and unremitting determination are needed. All of us together must show that we are capable of doing this. The adoption of the draft resolution before the General Assembly will help us in this, and that is why I warmly commend this text to the attention of all delegations.

The President (*interpretation from Spanish*): I now call on the representative of Argentina also to introduce draft resolution A/50/L.6.

Mr. Sersale di Cerisano (Argentina) (*interpretation from Spanish*): I have the honour to address this Assembly on behalf of the 21 countries members of the Ibero-American Summit: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Portugal, Uruguay and Venezuela. The 21 countries of the Ibero-American Summit, who are among the sponsors of draft resolution A/50/L.6, support the text before the Assembly, which was submitted in both Spanish and French.

Paragraph 17 of the Bariloche Declaration, adopted only a few days ago, on 17 October, by the 21 Heads of State of the Ibero-American Summit, states:

"Since the Ibero-American cultural heritage and its means of expression constitute a common heritage for our nations, it is indispensable to protect and promote it in all possible forums, especially in those organizations, agencies and institutions where it is an official language".

Inspired by this thought of our Heads of State, we have endeavoured to promote this organization's use of the six official languages which, for us, stand on an equal footing in terms of the treatment of the Members of this Organization. What we mean to propose is that we comply with decisions that have been adopted over the last 50 years of the history of this Organization. In other words, the original five, and now, with the addition of Arabic, six languages must be treated on the same level. But we are facing a different development. For questions of practicality and for the sake of efficiency, quite often this enriching diversity is neglected. And this marks a trend that we would wish to avoid.

The proposal of the countries of the Ibero-American Summit and the other sponsors has no budgetary implications. We are simply seeking to ensure compliance with what Member States have decided. Therefore, invite

Member States and request the Secretary-General to ensure the strict implementation of the resolutions establishing language arrangements for the United Nations, about which we give all necessary data in the preambular part of the draft resolution. This, of course, has implications with respect to recruitment, because we wish this treatment of the six languages to be reflected in the Organization's recruitment policies.

Also in the operative part, we address the Secretariat, urging it to take these provisions into consideration when it comes to recruitment and promotion. This has implications in other areas also: in the field of training, where we are very much concerned that we do not see equal treatment in the teaching of the six official languages. We call upon the Assembly to ensure that this not continue and that existing provisions be followed.

A further point of concern to us and which we wish to try to remedy goes beyond Headquarters. Since the United Nations, through its documentation, materials and scientific and technological research, disseminates a great deal of material, is that high-calibre knowledge produced here and throughout the system disseminated in all official languages? Who has access to that work and that documentation? It is our university researchers, our technicians and our students at all levels of education; and this is the very soul of how the work of the United Nations is absorbed in our countries.

We, the sponsors of this draft resolution, want to ensure that the work of the United Nations, which contributes to all areas that enhance the well-being of mankind, will be disseminated in the official languages so that the work of this Organization may be properly carried out in all Member and observer countries.

I repeat that this draft resolution does not have budgetary implications. It should be considered as seeking to fulfil decisions we have taken. Consistent with our own decisions with respect to rationalization of the work of the Assembly, we propose a review of this matter within two years.

Mr. Boisson (Monaco) (*interpretation from French*): The draft resolution on multilingualism that is before the Assembly reminds us, following another series of initiatives of the same nature, that our Organization is not a monolithic being, a soulless bureaucracy, but a living organism within which human beings — men and women from different regions of the world, heirs to rich and

historic cultures — are brought together to collaborate on an equal footing, while respecting the values and principles proclaimed by the United Nations Charter. The world, in its diversity and richness, is thus associated with the action of the United Nations. This association cannot and must not ever be based on exclusion.

Now, linguistic impoverishment, like any other form of impoverishment, does involve exclusion. We note this in the economic and social area, with poverty, and in the area of education, with illiteracy. We note it also in the scientific area, where there is a growing gap between those who have access to knowledge and progress and those excluded from these things. Consequently, it seems more than ever essential to ensure that this Organization, now 50 years old, does not find itself cut off from an important source of its wealth and its interest — that is to say, from its universality.

Multilingualism is one of the foundations of the United Nations — indeed, its very essence. It is one of the expressions of the Organization's universal character — the major element in a multilateral and multidisciplinary dialogue between nations in the service of peace and economic and social development, as well as the promotion of human rights and public freedoms.

There would be a sort of misunderstanding, but also of contempt for cultures, amounting to culpable negligence *vis-à-vis* modes of thought and intellectual and philosophical concepts of the world, if we were not to use the official languages, so fortunately, so wisely bestowed on the Organization, and which are one of its most beautiful forms of expression. To our way of thinking, this usage is an area of respect for "the other" and for others — for our differences, which constitute our wealth and the very source of harmonious and balanced international collaboration between sovereign States.

As this Organization celebrates its jubilee, should we not, rather, confirm its international dimension and commit ourselves to respect for the will expressed by its Member States, which recognized the following as official and working languages — Spanish in 1948, Russian in 1968, Chinese and Arabic in 1973 — having, at the creation of the Organization, established English and French as official and working languages of the Secretariat? In this regard, let us also recall that, according to article 111 of the Charter, the Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish texts of the Charter are equally authentic.

This constitutional obligation and respect for the decisions of the General Assembly are imposed on us unreservedly, and they must apply both at the level of bodies and at the level of meetings, including informal ones, and within the Secretariat and in relations with Member States. This, in our view, is not just a matter of principle but also a matter of quality and effectiveness, because the wealth, the nuances and the fullness of oral or written expression are authentic and convincing only when conceived and put forward in the mother tongue or in a language learned in school or university. Claude Levi-Strauss, whose thinking transformed man's vision of man, reminded us that language is an aspect of human reason which has its own reasons, and that man does not understand that.

Consequently, the draft resolution before the Assembly is of extreme importance to the Government of Monaco. It is not an administrative text inspired by some purely bureaucratic or formal reflex. On the contrary, it touches upon the very nature of this Organization — its multilateral character, its universal, international dimension, its roots and its foundations. Now, the most beautiful of plants cannot survive if its roots die, and the most solid of buildings cannot stand for long when its foundations are fragile or deficient.

To me it seems perfectly justifiable, to avoid any such failure, for the United Nations this year, forcefully and with conviction, to recall its commitment to one of its irreplaceable sources of wealth, its multilingualism. That is why the delegation of Monaco invites the Assembly to adopt draft resolution A/50/L.6 of which the Principality of Monaco is one of the sponsors.

Mr. Adechi (Benin) (*interpretation from French*): Diversity is a defining characteristic of all human groups. We must accept it and recognize it as a manifestation of freedom. In these times, when science, technology, communications and data processing are giving rise to profound changes in the very structure of knowledge and in our individual and collective destinies, it is essential not to lose sight of the fact that universal culture is diverse.

It is on the basis of this concern that Benin has joined numerous other delegations in sponsoring draft resolution A/50/L.6, on multilingualism. Our purpose is to restore respect for the principle of the equality of the official languages of the Organization and of the working languages of the Secretariat — in short, to ensure

observance of the principle of diversity of languages and cultures within the United Nations system.

The impact of language goes far beyond the realm of communication. It also enhances cultural heritage and intellectual experience. Language is the means and the product of culture as the tool of thought. This is why, as we come to create new avenues for international cooperation and social progress, we consider it important that all players be in a position to make their own contribution to the maturation and consolidation of principles that will serve as the foundation of international relations. This purpose can be pursued dynamically and can produce meaningful results only if the movement supporting it encourages respect for the cultural identity of its members, safeguarding pluralism and drawing nourishment from the richness of that diversity. It is in this way that our great ideals will benefit from the broadest possible support.

The United Nations is the sole universal forum for dialogue, consultation and negotiation. Our aim should be to facilitate strict respect for the right to make oneself understood and to understand others, because proper understanding of the issues being debated is our best assurance of the richest and most productive participation.

I wish also to emphasize the importance that we attach to this draft resolution by stressing that, today, the players in international life are growing in number and in diversity. We must therefore act urgently to achieve ever greater democratization of international life. We believe that the opportunity to express oneself and to participate contributes to that democratization by taking into account the points of view and concerns of the "silent" — those who are reduced to silence or who remain silent because they cannot participate actively in debates or make good use of the documentation available to them.

For all these reasons I am convinced that this draft resolution will be welcomed and will be adopted by consensus.

Mr. Moubarak (Lebanon) (*interpretation from French*): Lebanon is a country where, in addition to the official language, Arabic, foreign languages are widely spoken. French and English are common languages which the great majority of Lebanese learn and use from their earliest days at school and in universities and their everyday life. Public and private primary education teaches French and English along with Arabic. In our universities,

those two languages are also used for technical and literary courses.

Our country, a coastal State of the Mediterranean, is privileged to have invented and disseminated the world's first alphabet. We have therefore always understood that the use of several languages is a source of enrichment, helping people to grasp nuances of meaning in a Manichean world that tends to over-systematize values to the detriment of a perception of reality. That is why my delegation is a sponsor of the draft resolution before us.

As we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations, there is a need to set the record straight by stressing the equal importance that the official and working languages of the General Assembly should enjoy in international life. It is essential to ensure that the various official and working languages be used in equal measure within the United Nations.

It is common knowledge that there is a growing imbalance, to the disadvantage of certain official and working languages, in particular through the systematic delay recorded in the issue of documents. We propose that the imbalance we have noted be corrected; in order to do so, certain measures must be taken to give effect to the concept of the universality of the United Nations through its corollary, multilingualism. It is necessary that the same opportunities be available to each Member State of the Organization, regardless of its official or working languages, to understand and express itself on the issues before it without hindrance.

Multilingualism is the concrete manifestation through language of a continuing enrichment through the shades of meaning specific to the sensibility of each culture. It is therefore clear why it is imperative to tackle the shortcomings evident in the inadequate functioning of multilingualism in our Organization. Our purpose goes beyond coldly theoretical and calculated egalitarianism in the use of official or working languages. Rather, it pertains to the richness, complexity and diversity of humanity itself.

It is by restoring the effective and harmonious use of languages within our Organization that we can do the international community a great service and provide every opportunity to delegations and representatives to understand and express concepts and values in all their fullness in their mother tongue or the language of their

choice, with the sole aim of better realizing the purposes of the United Nations Charter.

Mr. Ould Ely (Mauritania) (*interpretation from French*): The inclusion on the General Assembly's agenda of the item on multilingualism undoubtedly reflects the growing interest of many delegations. It is, in fact, the manifestation of the increasing importance of the role of language to international relations. Given an insufficiently effective and systematic use of languages within the United Nations, this is the proper place for the issue to be considered. Many Member countries are increasingly concerned that the numerous resolutions and other rules governing the linguistic regime in the various United Nations bodies be reflected in the parity of languages and the best available interpretation and translation services.

We must acknowledge the fact that the official and working languages are used unequally within our Organization. Faced with this situation, Member States have repeatedly drawn the attention of the Secretariat officials concerned to this problem, which is becoming more and more disturbing. Indeed, the importance of this matter is reflected in the number of decisions and resolutions that have been adopted in this regard without ever achieving their desired aims. The celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations therefore seems to us to be a propitious occasion to reaffirm our earlier decisions, but especially to seek ways of putting them into practice.

The universality of the United Nations requires that each Member State have the opportunity to express itself in the official language of its choice and to make itself understood in that language without discrimination or hindrance. Over and above the needs of communication, the parity of languages — particularly the working languages of the Secretariat — is also a source of major concern to many delegations. That is why it is necessary to ensure that this long-sought parity at last be reflected in the recruitment of staff and in their methods of work.

The interpenetration of cultures fostered by the remarkable progress that has been achieved in modern communications has reduced distances and differences. The world of today, which we call the "global village", needs understanding and mutual cooperation among peoples and nations more than ever before. In this respect, languages continue to play a pre-eminent role as the key to all mutual understanding, the universal basis of peace and harmony. My delegation is therefore happy to support the draft

resolution on multilingualism and calls on all other delegations to support it.

Mr. Daouda Diabate (Côte d'Ivoire) (*Interpretation from French*): I am happy to be able to speak for the second time on behalf of my country, Côte d'Ivoire, before this noble and historic commemorative session of the General Assembly, which is celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations, in order to address a subject of extreme importance: the draft resolution on multilingualism.

Côte d'Ivoire, a sponsor of this draft resolution, would like to recall that multilingualism, whose importance for the future development of the Organization's activities and its Member States was perceived and stressed so appropriately by the founders of our Organization from the start, far from being a factor for discord and division, in fact allows the United Nations to be enriched by our diversity and our differences.

In this regard, a quick review of the documents shows how long this matter has been with us. It is addressed by resolutions dating back to 1946 and 1966, to mention only two.

Paradoxically, despite this long history, the issue of multilingualism is as acute and timely as ever. Thus, on 20 December 1966, the General Assembly, in its resolution on multilingualism, requested the Secretary-General

"to study the methods which should be used to ensure a more equitable use of the working languages of the Organization and a better balance among those languages in the recruitment of staff at all levels, and in particular at the higher levels, of the Secretariat, and to include his conclusions on this question in his future reports" (*resolution 2241 B (XXI), operative paragraph*).

No one could challenge the relevance of this request to the current situation. Although it dates from 1966, it could validly be inserted into the draft resolution we are debating today. That simple fact is enough to tell us how overriding is the need to move forward in adopting and implementing our resolutions.

Neither the difficulties of the moment, nor the structural problems of the United Nations, which have often led representatives and others who work at the

Organization to agree to work in a language other than their official or working languages, should allow the elevation into a principle of a situation born *a priori* of compromise. Otherwise, in the long term, this would lead to the certain impoverishment of our Organization which, by virtue of the cultural and linguistic diversity it comprises, constitutes a true source of wealth.

In the light of this observation, my delegation feels that the commemorative session of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations should present an opportunity to reaffirm the fundamental importance of the diversity of cultures, as well as the need to practice multilingualism within the United Nations in order to ensure the harmonious development of international life.

Consequently, the delegation of Côte d'Ivoire, a sponsor of the draft resolution on multilingualism, invites the Assembly to adopt it by consensus.

Mr. Yáñez-Barnuevo (Spain) (*interpretation from Spanish*): The delegation of Spain supports the views that have been expressed in this debate by the delegation of Argentina, as representative of the country now acting as interim Secretary of the Ibero-American Conference.

Article 1, paragraph 4 of the Charter defines our Organization as a centre for "harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends" of the United Nations.

That is the foundation for the universal orientation that characterizes this Organization, whose practical reflection lies in the fact that 185 Member States are represented today in the General Assembly.

So established, the mission of harmonizing the diverse aims of States within the setting of the United Nations has a corollary, which is the need to articulate a dialogue among us all which, if it is to be fruitful, must be informed by the cultural pluralism that the Members of the Organization bring to their work.

The General Assembly which, indeed, could not have done less, supported this necessity in one of its first decisions by adopting, in resolution 2 (I) of its first session, on 1 February 1946, the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, which laid down as official languages in United Nations organs Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. Two years later, resolution 262 (III) of 11 December 1948 established Spanish as a working language, as well as English and French. Reaffirming its

commitment to the diversity of cultures represented in the United Nations, the General Assembly extended to Russian in 1968 and to Arabic and Chinese in 1973 the status of official and working languages of the General Assembly.

Thus, at present, Spanish, together with Arabic, Chinese, English, French and Russian, are the official and working languages of the General Assembly and its Committees and Subcommittees, as well as of the Security Council and other organs of the United Nations.

Accordingly, the conditions required not only for the enrichment of deliberations within our Organization, but also for public opinion in our countries to feel able to identify with our work seem to have been met.

For my country, Spain, which lives in linguistic pluralism in its own society, the defence and strengthening of the principle of the use of different official languages in our work and deliberations takes on a particular importance.

In this respect, and as far as Spanish is concerned, my delegation wishes to reiterate its firm desire that the Secretariat should take great care to apply the provisions pertaining not only to the effective and reliable translation of official documents and the prompt distribution of such documents once translated, but also to the need for availability of interpretation services in the various official languages at all meetings that require them.

Likewise, it is particularly important to my delegation that the Organization, when it recruits personnel, should ensure that such personnel have a command of and use at least one of the six official languages of the United Nations. This, of course, should be supplemented by ensuring the continued training of such professional staff in the knowledge of the official and working languages.

Moreover, my delegation believes it important to ensure that the present courses for the teaching of Spanish, as well as those for the other official and working languages, should at all levels remain able to respond to the clear interest in knowing a language that is spoken by hundreds of millions of people.

Also, aware of the need for our Governments and our citizens to have the necessary information regarding the work of the United Nations, my delegation believes that the Organization's archive and library services and

its data banks must be available for use in all the official languages.

My delegation, of course, is aware of the financial difficulties our Organization is experiencing. However, we believe that this cannot be an argument for the obvious intellectual impoverishment and concomitant loss of effectiveness for the United Nations that would result from a careless application of the Organization's current language arrangements.

These are the reasons that have prompted the Spanish delegation to lend its support to the request for inclusion on the agenda of this session of an additional item entitled "Multilingualism", which is under consideration by the General Assembly today.

I wish to underscore that for my country it was a source of special satisfaction to sign this request, together with all the other States members of the Ibero-American Conference. It is an additional source of satisfaction that, on the eve of the session that brings us together today, the Ibero-American Summit, meeting in Bariloche, Argentina, affirmed, in the solemn Declaration adopted there by the Heads of State and Government of Ibero-American countries, that it is indispensable to protect and promote Spanish in those organizations, agencies and international institutions in which it has official status, as is obviously the case with the United Nations.

The delegation of Spain, which is among the sponsors of draft resolution A/50/L.6, trusts that this text will be favourably received by the Assembly, as merited by its content and its broad sponsorship.

Mrs. Decerega-Smith (Panama) (*interpretation from Spanish*): My delegation supports the statement made by the representative of Argentina on behalf of the Ibero-American Conference.

My delegation will base its statement on the item entitled "Multilingualism" on a letter written 25 years ago to the Secretary-General of the United Nations by the Permanent Representative of Panama. Ambassador Illueca, who holds the same post now as he did then, indicated in that letter that he was among the Spanish-speaking Latin American representatives who at one stage embarked upon a campaign to ensure that the use of Spanish should be adopted in the interpretation and documentation services on an equal footing with the other working languages of the General Assembly and its organs.

Ambassador Illueca also said that he was alluding to that campaign in order to emphasize his concern at the fact that such use on an equal footing was not being observed, as well as his view that much remained to be done and that financial and other difficulties did not justify failure to comply with the various resolutions the General Assembly had adopted with respect to the use of languages in the United Nations.

Moreover, he stressed that he did not wish a concern pertaining to a cultural consideration to appear in a political light. As a Latin American, his concern was based on elements such as the need of the United Nations to find the means to achieve linguistic internationalism. Internationalism in the United Nations is interculturalism. That feature is directly linked to the foundations and purposes of the United Nations, and the oral and written word is the most immediate instrument to bring out the full value of each culture. An international organization with the calling of the United Nations would be threatened with impoverishment if it spoke and wrote but a single language.

Ambassador Illueca went on to say in his letter that Latin America, by virtue of the characteristics of its physical and spiritual development, presented a case of exceptional linguistic unification. The search for Latin American expression was achieved through a cultural melting pot, to which its oral and written language is faithful testimony. If appropriate use is not made of Spanish in the United Nations, representatives of a culture of which this language is a fundamental part cannot participate equitably. To impose on us a single language, which is not ours, would be to disregard the fact that language is an instrument of dialogue and therefore constitutes an essential instrument in the work of the United Nations.

Those are some of the points set out in Ambassador Illueca's letter. My delegation believes that everything said there remains valid today.

With the passage of time, other languages have achieved the right of expression in the United Nations. This Organization must be consistent with the multilingualism that is its nature. A few days ago, His Holiness Pope John Paul II reminded us that there is a sovereignty based on culture, and that for all States Members of the Organization to be able to exercise that sovereignty in the United Nations requires that all officially recognized languages should find the broadest possible room for expression.

Panama has held this position for many years, in New York as in other specialized agencies of the United Nations system. In this we have had the support of the other Latin American delegations and of the delegation of Spain, the country from which we inherited a language on which we have made our own mark.

My delegation trusts that the draft resolution contained in document A/50/L.6 will be adopted and that its application will be a task of the greatest importance to the United Nations.

Mr. Nothomb (Belgium) (*interpretation from French*): Belgium is happy to be able to sponsor the draft resolution on multilingualism, which the representative of France just presented today. We feel, indeed, that this matter is an important one. Belgium is not only among the 44 countries that speak French; it is itself a multilingual country. Belgium in fact has three official languages, corresponding to the three linguistic communities which make it up. Both history and experience have shown us that respect for multilingualism, based on the equality of official languages, is a factor for communication and for drawing people together. It is also a crucial factor in our unity. If my country finds that this is an important element at the national level, the logic of its necessity at the international level becomes quite obvious.

The diversity of cultures finds expression in the United Nations, in particular, through the equality among official and working languages. This testifies to the respect which this Organization accords to the expression of the dominant cultures of this planet, which is a guarantee of a better understanding of others, of greater esteem, of better appreciation of what we all have in common. Each language, indeed, is imbued with its own particular spirit, a certain vision of the world that would of necessity be diminished if it could not be expressed.

Belgium thought that it was appropriate in the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations for this principle to be recalled because it has noted with regret that it was not always adequately respected. While the pressure of the moment has at times justified this, we find that situations that should have remained the exceptions are tending to become the rule, and that it is more and more common for documents not to be available in time in all the official languages, or for the interpretation services to be unable to keep up with the multiplication of informal meetings.

A certain flexibility has often been shown in this respect. Even though this may be usual, it should not make us forget the principle which this draft resolution is intended to recall and repeat. The fact that the representatives of our Governments here at the United Nations generally speak English should not make us forget that the people in our capitals need to be informed as quickly as possible in the language they know, in order to react promptly.

The story of the Tower of Babel does not need to be recounted in detail to show the importance of this principle. To be sure, sometimes one might feel that the United Nations seems to produce an enormous volume of words, and so one might question their proliferation in several languages. The fact is that words have value, as this Assembly is well aware. If certain words that now have universal currency and acceptance have acquired their meaning and substance as a result of our discussions, it is precisely because of this juxtaposition of differing or similar interpretations given to them by the particular vision of the various languages that define them. These languages are the reflection not only of a culture, but also of a history and a state of mind; they are integral parts of a patrimony.

The United Nations must remain the guardian of this wealth of dialogue which it wishes to foster. Otherwise, it would be failing in its calling as a universal body. It also would run the risk of being less highly regarded from the outside. Moreover, it is important for its message to be understood by public opinion. This calling should not be compromised by practical and financial considerations. If that were so, the United Nations would in a way lose its soul: indeed, to communicate is to nurture a way of thinking that has many shapes and facets, but reaches to the widest possible horizons and is based on tolerance.

Mr. Kumamaru (Japan): Before making this statement, I would like to note that the delegations of the Republic of Korea and Thailand wish to associate themselves with the views it contains.

The delegation of Japan would like to draw the attention of the Assembly to paragraph 3 of the draft resolution, in which the General Assembly requests the Secretary-General to ensure that personnel recruited by the different bodies of the Organization have a command and use at least one of the six official languages, in addition to one working language of the Secretariat. In our view, requiring a command of two of the six official

languages would discriminate excessively against personnel whose mother tongue is not one of these languages. Consideration must be given to personnel not born into cultures that utilize one of the official United Nations languages, and therefore do not benefit from the current language arrangements. Already at a disadvantage, they should not be required to have command of yet another foreign language.

My delegation supports the idea that the United Nations should promote cultural diversity. To do that, however, it should avoid unfairly penalizing those cultures not associated with the six official languages of this Organization. Japan therefore proposes the following amendments, and recommends that the decision on the draft resolution be postponed until informal consultations are held.

First, we propose that the word "ensure" in the first line of paragraph 3 be replaced by the word "encourage". And secondly, at the end of paragraph 3 of the draft resolution, the following language should be added: "taking into account the difficulties faced by personnel whose mother tongue is not one of the official languages".

Mrs. Teo-Jacob (Singapore): My country is perhaps fortunate that two of the official United Nations languages, English and Chinese, are also two of the official languages of Singapore. This draft resolution, if passed, will not affect us too much one way or another. We therefore speak with some objectivity and with no vested interests.

(spoke in Chinese)

We have no vested interests.

(spoke in English)

It is from this standpoint that we would like to seek clarification on a few points before any action is taken. Our concerns relate in particular to paragraph 3. As drafted, paragraph 3 suggests that there is a clear difference between the official languages and the working languages of the United Nations. However, as we all know, rule 51 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly makes it very clear that Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish are both official and working languages of the United Nations. This point is in fact plainly stated in the fourth preambular paragraph of the draft resolution.

It is therefore all the more puzzling why paragraph 3 expresses this simple point in such an obscure, convoluted and indeed misleading way. If recast in plain English, what paragraph 3 is saying is simply that the Secretary-General should ensure that personnel recruited by the United Nations should know two official languages of the United Nations. This simple point has been obscured by the use of deliberately opaque language. I hope it was only a mistake of drafting.

There is another crucial ambiguity in paragraph 3. This is in the phrase "personnel recruited". As now drafted, it is unclear whether the phrase refers to personnel that will be recruited in the future, or whether it refers to personnel that have already been recruited and are now working in the United Nations. Without qualification, the phrase "personnel recruited" could well refer to past, present or future. There are problems in any case. Are we to understand that people who have already been recruited by the United Nations who are not so fortunate as to know two official languages should therefore have their appointments terminated forthwith by the Secretary-General? If such a harsh measure is not contemplated, is it therefore the intention of the draft resolution that these unfortunates should be retrained by the Secretariat, as seems to be implied by the eighth preambular paragraph? If so, where will funds for this retraining come from?

If the phrase "personnel recruited" is intended to refer to personnel that will be recruited in the future, then the effect of this draft resolution, if it is passed, will be to systematically and systemically discriminate against nationals of countries not so fortunate as to have any of the official United Nations languages as their native languages. If nationals of these countries should aspire to work for the United Nations, they will face the daunting task of learning two new languages. Few may qualify.

This would be a grave injustice, particularly since most of the countries that are in this unfortunate situation would be the smaller and less developed countries. By and large, it will be nationals of the advanced developed countries, particularly those from Europe — and I would like to point out that four out of the six official United Nations languages are European languages — who would henceforth have the best chance of being recruited by the United Nations. This would detract from the universal and multicultural character of the United Nations. I hope that this is not the intention of this draft resolution.

Let me conclude by reiterating that Singapore has no vested interest in this issue. But precisely because we have been able to take an objective look at this matter, we have concluded that this is not as simple or straightforward an issue as it might seem at first glance. We suggest that before we take any action on this draft resolution, the Secretariat should clarify the points I have raised and all delegations should be given more time to reflect on the Secretariat's answers. The United Nations has operated for 50 years with its present language arrangements. A pause for reflection will do the Organization no harm. On the other hand, we may well regret precipitate action.

Mr. Abdellah (Tunisia) (*interpretation from Arabic*): Tunisia's belief that openness to the outside world enriches the various cultures of the world, draws peoples together and contributes to overcoming factors of division and confrontation. At the level of the United Nations, such openness finds expression in the coexistence and harmony that we seek between the official and working languages approved by the Charter.

Tunisia, with its age-old civilization which has always been characterized by moderation, is in favour of maintaining and strengthening the humanitarian and spiritual principles upon which the United Nations was founded and is in favour also of strengthening cultural and humanitarian interaction between communities.

At the domestic level, and in the interests of cultural openness to our neighbours in the north of the Mediterranean basin, Tunisia has concluded agreements with both Italy and France to enable Tunisian citizens to receive certain television broadcasts from those two friendly countries. There is no doubt that the accelerating technological progress in the areas of communications and culture will contribute greatly to reducing distances, to propagating ideas, to bringing the peoples of the region closer together and, thereby, to eliminating any contradictions that may set them apart.

At the external level, Tunisia has focused on promoting harmonious relations with other countries in consonance with an ever-renewed vision and with principles that are bound to open up promising vistas for peoples on the basis of cooperation, coexistence and common interests.

This outlook has been given concrete form in many areas such as emigration. In this regard, Tunisia is working to find appropriate formulas that would make the phenomenon of emigration a factor of convergence and

mutual enrichment in terms of human values and culture, while making it an economic bridge between the South and the North.

At the same time, I should like to say that the proclamation of 1995 as the United Nations Year for Tolerance is of special significance to us. Our support for the draft resolution on multilingualism within the United Nations and our commitment to consolidating this principle is, in our view, a contribution we make towards the strengthening of this noble tendency and towards combating parochialism and rejection of the other. Consequently, it is an effective contribution to the promotion of tolerance, openness and fruitful constructive cooperation between individuals and amongst communities and peoples.

(*spoke in French*)

Tunisia welcomes the inclusion of this agenda item on multilingualism in the United Nations. Consideration of this topic at a time when the international community is preparing to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the United Nations has a double meaning.

To affirm the multilingual calling of the United Nations is, first of all, to pay tribute to the founding fathers of this great institution, who in their wisdom wanted this Organization, which emerged from a destructive war caused by a lack of understanding and rejection of difference, to be a symbol and a manifestation of respect for "the other" in all his diversity.

Contrary to totalitarian ideologies, the principles of our Organization emphasize respect and call for safeguarding differences at the level of individuals and of the peoples that constitute the international community. Differences are to be seen as mutual enrichment, for the originality of peoples is a contribution, an input on all sides to universality itself. Far from seeking uniformity and the levelling of differences, the philosophy at the foundation of the San Francisco Charter is a declaration of faith in the freedom of individuals and the right of peoples to diversity.

Today's discussion of multilingualism is also a very happy coincidence. Recalling the importance of linguistic diversity within the United Nations is one of the main elements of the overall thinking taking place in many

forums to contribute to renewing the United Nations and to instilling new dynamism in it.

Although this thinking on the future of the Organization is far from complete, and to the contrary, is expanding in scope thanks to the many efforts made in that direction, Tunisia hopes that the question of multilingualism will elicit due interest and will be an important element of any plan agreed upon to increase the efficiency and influence of our Organization.

It goes without saying that the reaffirmation by all — in the academic world and in the field — of the international community's interest in recognizing and consolidating linguistic diversity must, at the same time, be accompanied by concrete actions and daily gestures to ensure harmonious, mutually beneficial and mutually fruitful existence for all cultures.

In other words, Tunisia feels that the principle of respect for the use of all official languages recognized by the Charter must be reflected in reality in all United Nations meetings. No matter how valid a reason might be, in our view it should not be a pretext for discriminatory practices that do not respect the will of Member States and trample upon the principles of linguistic equality desired by the founding fathers of the Organization.

Mr. Yoogalingam (Malaysia): The draft resolution (A/50/L.6) before us embodies a concept dear to all of us, namely multilingualism. Overall, the draft resolution would contribute to the promotion of multilingualism in the Organization. Monolingualism in this Organization poses problems for all of us.

In Malaysia, the national language is Bahasa Malaysia which is also the medium of instruction in our tertiary institutions. Yet the Malaysian language is not one of the United Nations languages. Despite the fact that Malaysia's own national language is not one of the United Nations languages, we continue to participate in the work of the Organization, through the use of one of the official United Nations languages.

Malaysia therefore welcomes the thrust of the draft resolution. However, paragraph 3 poses problems for us. By requesting the Secretary-General to ensure that personnel recruited by the various bodies of the Organization have a command of and use at least one of the six official languages in addition to one working language of the Secretariat it would only place at a disadvantage those whose mother tongue is not one of the

United Nations languages, for instance Malaysia. It would be grossly unfair and unhelpful for applicants to know more than one United Nations language. This would discriminate against those of us who are already disadvantaged. It would prevent the nationals of these countries, who I daresay constitute a large number, from serving in the United Nations civil service. In the quest to strike parity among the United Nations languages, those already disadvantaged would be further discriminated against.

My delegation is aware of resolution 2480 B (XXIII) adopted on 21 December 1968. The language as reflected in the draft text before us departs from the spirit and the substance of the 1968 resolution.

Taking that into account, my delegation would like to propose two options: the first being to delete paragraph 3 and the other that it be amended to read as follows:

"Requests the Secretary-General to take into account the difficulties faced by applicants whose mother tongue is not one of the official languages when recruiting and promoting personnel for different bodies of the Organization."

As we have not had sufficient time to consider the draft resolution, we would request the sponsors to exercise patience and understanding for those of us who have serious problems with the text. In this regard, I wish to appeal for that the decision on the draft resolution to be deferred. However, in the event that this appeal is not acceptable, we request that action be taken on the amendment proposed by my delegation and that, if necessary, we take a vote on the draft resolution on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis.

The President: I would request members to submit amendments to the Secretariat in written form.

Mr. Albin (Mexico) (interpretation from Spanish): My delegation wishes to express its satisfaction that this agenda item is being considered at this session of the General Assembly. The fiftieth anniversary of the Organization affords a particularly suitable setting in which to reflect upon and bring out certain aspects of our working methods that at times seem to take on a lesser importance. My delegation supports the statement made by the representative of Argentina on behalf of the countries members of the Ibero-American Conference.

Member States have agreed on the use of certain languages in conducting United Nations activities to carry out the Organization's objectives. In keeping with decisions set forth in the General Assembly's rules of procedure and resolutions, such languages are to be employed on an equal footing. The official languages, therefore, are an optimal and indispensable communications tool. Their use is the best guarantee of dialogue, negotiation and understanding among the United Nations.

We note with concern that at the present time the Organization's ever-growing needs and activities have in practice been reflected in an inequitable use of United Nations official and working languages. We firmly believe that this situation must be corrected within the framework of the existing rules.

We believe that the draft resolution before us contains the minimum measures necessary to ensure the use, on an equal footing, of the official and working languages of the Organization. We believe that this will contribute to strengthening the multilingual character of the United Nations.

We support and endorse the initiative taken by the sponsors of this text, and we urge all Member States to do the same. There can be no doubt that today, after 50 years of unremitting labour, these measures will greatly benefit the Organization.

Mr. Fitschen (Germany): I have the honour to speak on behalf of Austria and Liechtenstein as well as of my own country. Unlike many preceding speakers, I do not have the privilege of expressing myself in my own language, but I am, of course, happy to use one of the working languages of the United Nations.

Germany, Austria and Liechtenstein have joined the sponsors of draft resolution A/50/L.6 because we share the concept of multilingualism in the United Nations and the concerns behind the draft resolution now before the General Assembly for adoption.

We know about the usefulness of a timely and precise translation of United Nations documents from our own national experience. Germany, Austria and Liechtenstein,

together with Switzerland, have for some 20 years now financed the German Translation Service, which was established by the General Assembly in resolution 3355 (XXIX) of 18 December 1974. Through the translation of the resolutions of the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council, as well as of other important United Nations documents, the German Translation Service has over the years developed a concise and reliable United Nations terminology in German, the availability of which has been of the utmost importance for the public debate about United Nations matters in our countries. Our people, as well as our political institutions, take great interest in United Nations affairs, and the early availability of important United Nations documents in the German language — such as, for example, the texts of the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development or the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, to name but a few recent examples — greatly contributes to an informed public debate on the work of the United Nations.

It is against that background that we fully support the ideas expressed in draft resolution A/50/L.6. We regret, however, that it has not been possible to have the draft resolution acknowledge, in a preambular paragraph, the Assembly's decision to establish the German Translation Service, which in our view was a perfect expression of the idea of multilingualism in the United Nations. We have nevertheless joined the sponsors because we deem it particularly important that the provisions of the Charter and the rules of procedure concerning the use of languages in the United Nations be fully implemented. Let me add that we understand the concerns expressed earlier in the debate by Japan, Singapore and Malaysia. I am confident that they can be accommodated so that the draft resolution can be adopted by consensus.

The President: I should like to inform members that owing to the arrangements that have to be made in the General Assembly Hall in preparation for the Special Commemorative Meeting, I must adjourn the meeting at this point. Therefore, the remaining speakers on this agenda item will be heard next week, and the date will be announced in the *Journal*.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.